

# BICS

THE BEHAVIORAL  
INTERVENTIONS  
FOR CHILD SUPPORT  
SERVICES PROJECT

## DATES AND DEADLINES

# Behavioral Strategies to Increase Engagement in Child Support

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The Behavioral Interventions for Child Support Services (BICS) project aims to improve child support programs by increasing program efficiency, developing interventions informed by behavioral science, and building a culture of rapid-cycle evaluation. The Technical Assistance and Evaluation team is led by MDRC, which has partnered with MEF Associates and the Center for Policy Research. BICS is sponsored by the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The grantees are California, Colorado, the District of Columbia, Georgia, Ohio, Texas, Vermont, and Washington. The evaluation contract is overseen by the State of Washington's Division of Child Support in the Department of Social and Health Services.

**cabs**  at mdrc

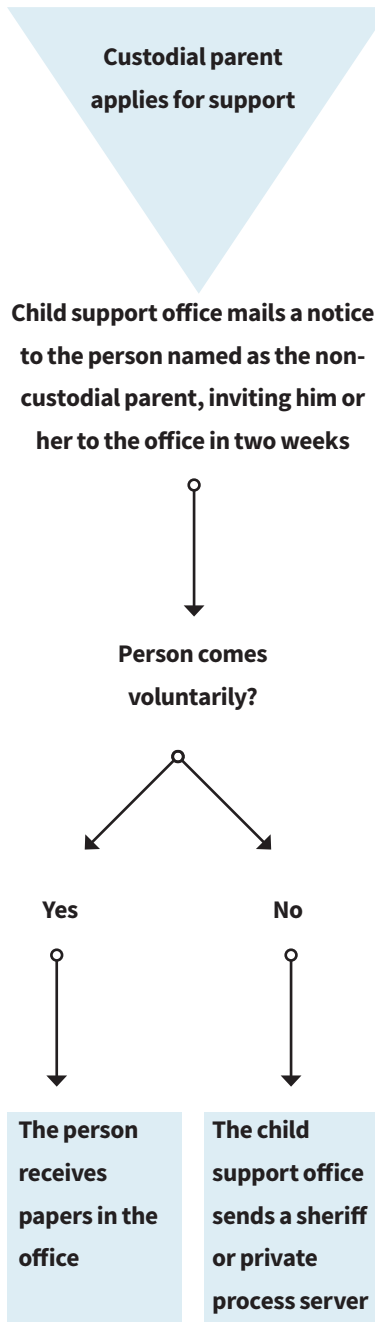
## OVERVIEW

State child support programs secure financial support for children whose parents live apart. These programs establish paternity, set orders for the amounts parents are required to pay, and collect and distribute payments. An essential step in the process of establishing paternity and setting an order of support is delivering legal documents to the person named as a parent (frequently referred to as the “noncustodial parent”). This step of delivering documents is known as “service.” A noncustodial parent typically receives a summons that says he or she has been named as the parent of a particular child, provides notice that a legal proceeding has been initiated, and sets a hearing date. The summons is usually delivered by certified mail or by a law enforcement officer. In many states, noncustodial parents can waive being served by accepting the legal documents in the child support office voluntarily, but few do.

A person who comes into the child support office to accept service voluntarily is actively engaging in the child support process. In doing so, the person benefits from reduced fees, a greater voice in the legal process, and a better understanding of the way an order is established. The child support program benefits from increased efficiency, reduced costs, and the ability to provide more information to parents. With these benefits in mind, the BICS team worked with the Georgia Division of Child Support Services (DCSS) to test a new form of outreach intended to get more people to accept service voluntarily. The intervention encouraged people who had been named as parents to come into the office and meet with staff members to discuss the child support process and their obligations. Using insights from behavioral science, the BICS team redesigned mailed materials and changed the nature of the initial meeting between noncustodial parents and child support staff members in an attempt to simplify the process and encourage parents to act.

The BICS team randomly assigned people in three counties to receive either the existing or redesigned outreach materials during an 11-month period. The test measured the percentage of

**Figure 1. The Start of the Child Support Process**



people who visited the office to accept service, as well as longer-term outcomes related to payment that may have seen effects if the redesigned meetings improved interactions between parents and staff members.

The new outreach materials increased the number of people who came to the office to accept service voluntarily by 8.2 percentage points, from 15.1 percent of the control group to 23.3 percent of the intervention group. This difference is statistically significant and represents a 54 percent increase, and coming into the office was the primary outcome of interest to the state of Georgia. After six months, the intervention did not appear to have any statistically significant effects on other, secondary outcomes of interest, including the number of fathers whose paternity was established, the number of parents for whom child support orders were set, the amounts they were ordered to pay, or their payment behavior. Front-line staff members reported that many parents reacted positively to the study materials, finding them novel, clear, and likable.

The following sections provide more background on the process the BICS team used to design the intervention, the study's findings, and implications of the research for the child support community. The approach tested in this study was customer-friendly and focused on strategies meant to make a person willing or likely to take practical action, and the results of this study suggest that these strategies can be used by child support programs to effectively engage parents in a less adversarial way. More research is needed to determine how to work with parents to improve the way child support orders are set and to improve payment outcomes once initial contact has been made.

## THE EXISTING PROCESS

The intervention tested in this study was implemented in the “order establishment” phase of the child support program. This phase is the period from the initiation of a child support case to the setting of an order, and involves multiple steps for the program's staff, custodial and noncustodial parents, and the court.<sup>1</sup> In Georgia, the process begins when a custodial parent applies for child support or another form of financial assistance from the state (see Figure 1). The child support office uses the address provided by the custodial parent to mail an initial notice to the person named as the noncustodial parent, informing him or her that a child support case has been opened. If the person is male and has not been legally determined to be the parent, the notice instructs him to go to the child support office for genetic testing to determine whether he is the biological father. The person typically has about two weeks to respond to the initial letter and come into the office. If the person comes into the office, he or she generally agrees to be served with legal child support papers

<sup>1</sup> A “custodial” parent either has sole physical custody of a child or has the child living with him or her most of the time.

on the spot. If the person does not come into the office, DCSS sends a sheriff or private process server to serve the parent at home or on the job.

In 2014 and 2015 only about 18 percent of the people who received the notice responded and accepted service voluntarily, according to historical data shared by the agency. Making contact with a noncustodial parent in the office gives the program an important opportunity to establish a cooperative working relationship with a parent to whom it may be providing services for years. However, the BICS team observed that even when a person did respond, the program did not take full advantage of this opportunity. The meeting was often mechanical, offering few opportunities for the person to ask questions or build a positive relationship with the agency.

There are several reasons it would be helpful to increase the percentage of people who accept service voluntarily. First, noncustodial parents who come into the office to accept service save money. Those who do not come into the office are charged a fee if DCSS has to send a private process server or sheriff. Second, going to the office gives a parent the opportunity to discuss the complicated paternity and order establishment process with a child support worker *before* going to court. If the meeting were designed to be helpful to the parent, it could help start the relationship between that parent and the child support office on better footing. Third, increasing the number of people who accept service voluntarily reduces the amount of time and money the agency has to spend locating and serving parents.

## INTERVENTION DESIGN

After identifying the problem, the BICS team engaged in a process called “behavioral diagnosis and design” to develop the intervention in partnership with the DCSS staff. Through interviews with staff members and parents, observations of program activities, and data analyses, the BICS team mapped out the steps in establishing an order and identified “behavioral bottlenecks” — points where parents and staff members may be affected by common psychological and behavioral tendencies that get in the way of completing the process. The team then developed an intervention to address the following bottlenecks:

- The initial notice sent by DCSS could be confusing and threatening, which may have caused parents to withdraw from the process.
- Parents may have forgotten about the appointment.
- Parents may have procrastinated or put off responding to the notice.

- The initial notice did not clearly explain that noncustodial parents are charged approximately \$45 if they are served by a sheriff or a private process server, whereas accepting service in the office is free.<sup>2</sup>
- Parents may have been mistrustful of the agency due to previous negative experiences with the staff, particularly if they already had child support cases or knew of the system through their social networks.

The intervention the BICS team developed focused on two steps in the existing process. First, the team designed a new outreach strategy to increase the number of responses to the initial notice sent by DCSS. (Increasing responses was designated as the primary goal of the intervention overall.) Second, the team provided training to staff members with the goal of making the establishment meeting more useful for those people who did respond to the outreach and came into the office. Figure 2 summarizes the insights from behavioral science that were incorporated into each component of the intervention to address the bottlenecks described above.

### The New Outreach Strategy

The team redesigned the communication strategy that DCSS employed to notify a person that a child support case had been opened. Figure 3 shows examples of the elements discussed below.

- **REDESIGNED LETTER IN AN EYE-CATCHING ENVELOPE.** The team replaced DCSS's notice with a new version designed using principles from behavioral science. The new letter had simpler language and was written to be nonadversarial and motivating. It included a specific appointment date as a deadline to complete the task. The letter aimed to help parents prepare for and actually attend the appointment by reducing the number of documents they were required to bring from 19 to 5 and by including a map of the office's location. It highlighted the chance for parents to have "a say in the child support process" and emphasized loss aversion by explaining that parents would have to pay about \$45 if they waited for service. The letter also conveyed that the agency would listen to the person's circumstances, especially in the case of low-income parents (who may have been the most anxious about cooperating with child support). It advertised a workforce training program for unemployed parents and the availability of a reduction in the order amount under certain circumstances (explained below). The content of the letter was formatted to make the most important information more prominent. Finally, the team mailed the letter in an envelope made of textured brown paper, including the parent's name and address handwritten on the front and the Georgia state

<sup>2</sup> Depending on the office, the fee if a sheriff or process server gets involved is either \$45 or \$47.50.

Figure 2. Concepts from Behavioral Science Used in the Intervention

| Intervention Component                            | Concept from Behavioral Science    |                            |  |                                      |   |
|---|------------------------------------|----------------------------|--|--------------------------------------|---|
|   | Simplify communication and process | Make outreach more salient | Build trust/invoke procedural justice principles | Emphasize short-term gains or losses | Include appointment time/use implementation prompts |
| 1. Revised invitation letter with calendar magnet | ✓                                  | ✓                          | ✓  | ✓                                    | ✓   |
| 2. Reminder pamphlet                              | ✓                                  | ✓                          |  | ✓                                    | ✓   |
| 3. Improved order establishment meeting           |                                    |                            | ✓  | ✓                                    |   |

seal to make the letter more noticeable and to make recipients curious about its contents.

- **CALENDAR MAGNET.** The mailing also contained a small calendar magnet with the person's appointment date highlighted. It was included both to pique recipients' curiosity about the letter (because the magnet made the envelope slightly heavier) and to serve as a planning device that reminded them of a clear deadline.
- **REMINDER FLYER.** A reminder notice, styled like a flyer with no envelope but sealed with a sticker, was sent to noncustodial parents one week after the redesigned letter. The reminder reinforced important pieces of information, including the appointment date and time, the office's location, and the reasons a person should attend. This mailing also displayed the Georgia state seal on the outside to indicate the information was important.

Figure 3. Intervention Components

Initial Letter

Personalization, procedural justice

Implementation prompt

Simplification

Loss aversion

**Robert, have a say in the child support process.**

The Georgia Division of Child Support received an application for child support and you are named as the parent of Michael.

To protect your rights, the law requires that we work with you to confirm that you are Michael's father. If you are the father, we will also discuss the amount of your child support order during this appointment.

**WHAT DO TO NEXT:**

**1. Check the appointment date.**

- **October 25<sup>th</sup> at 2:00 p.m.**

*Need to reschedule? Call us: 1-844-694-2347.*

**2. Gather these documents.**


- Your 2 most recent paystubs
- 2014 or 2015 tax returns
- Other child support orders
- Proof of Social security payments to Michael
- Photo ID

*Don't have these documents? You should still attend!*

**3. Meet with your case worker in our office.**

1526 East Forrest Ave, Suite 300, East Point, GA 30344  
Located near Rt. 29 & Norman Berry Drive

Accessible by MARTA: East Point Station  
 Train lines: Red and Gold  
 Bus lines: 78, 79, 84, 93, 193, 194



**! Don't lose \$47.50 by doing nothing**

If you do not attend the priority appointment:

- The law requires that we serve you with a legal summons and you may have to pay a \$47.50 fee.
- Decisions about whether you are the father and how much you will have to pay in child support will move forward without your input.

**Take action now and avoid frustration later!**

**Not working full time?**  
We can work with you.  
Please turn the page.

➔

Reminder Magnet

**Remember your priority appointment!**

All you need to bring is:

- Your 2 most recent paystubs
- 2014 or 2015 tax returns
- Other child support orders
- Social security payments
- Photo ID

*Don't have these documents? You should still attend!*

Need to reschedule? Call us at 1-844-694-2347 | 2910 Miller Road, Suite 100, Decatur, GA 30035

Your appointment is on

October 25 at 2:00 p.m.

| SUN | MON       | TUE | WED | THURS | FRI | SAT |
|-----|-----------|-----|-----|-------|-----|-----|
|     |           |     |     |       | 1   | 2   |
| 3   | 4         | 5   | 6   | 7     | 8   | 9   |
| 10  | 11        | 12  | 13  | 14    | 15  | 16  |
| 17  | 18        | 19  | 20  | 21    | 22  | 23  |
| 24  | <b>25</b> | 26  | 27  | 28    | 29  | 30  |

Personalization (handwritten)

Reminders and implementation prompts

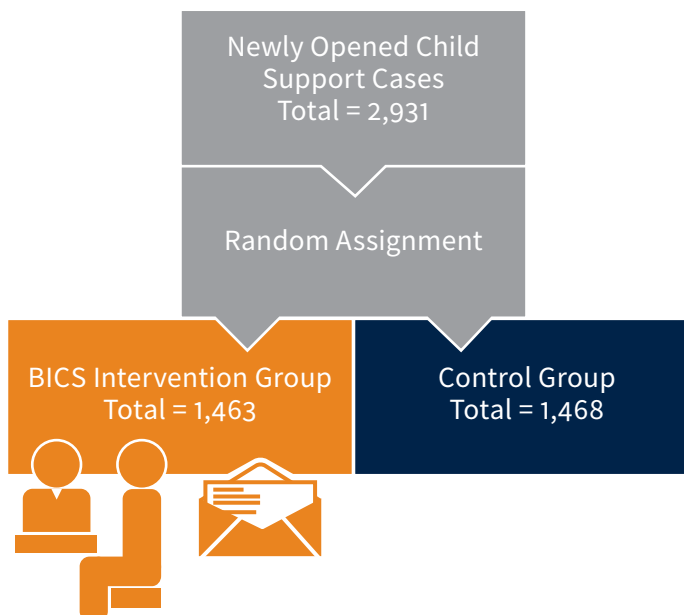
## The Enhanced Meeting

The initial meeting was changed in the following ways with the aim of making it more useful for parents.

- **STAFF TRAINING IN PRINCIPLES OF BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE AND PROCEDURAL JUSTICE.** Content experts from MDRC's Center for Applied Behavioral Science and the Center for Court Innovation provided administrative and front-line staff members with training in behavioral science and procedural justice. Procedural justice is a set of principles based on research that shows people are more likely to accept a legal outcome if the process is perceived to be fair. Fairness is conveyed through practices such as transparency, neutrality, and a voice for the parent in the process. The training aimed to persuade staff members that there was evidence to support the new forms of customer engagement the BICS team had developed, and to provide them the skills needed to adopt those forms of engagement.
- **SCRIPT AND CHECKLIST FOR STAFF MEMBERS TO USE DURING THE NEW MEETING.** The script included essential principles of procedural justice. The checklist was meant to ensure that staff members signed parents up for the state's online portal where they could make payments, that they encouraged parents to download the state's child support app for their smartphones, and that they set up automatic payments for parents when appropriate. It also reminded staff members to refer fathers to the Fatherhood Program, which provides services that can help them find employment.
- **A REDUCTION IN THE MINIMUM ORDER AMOUNT, WHERE APPROPRIATE.** The state typically sets a minimum order of about \$250 per month, an amount that assumes a parent is working full time at minimum wage. Under Georgia law, however, a DCSS staff member can request a reduction in that minimum amount if the agency has evidence that a person is not working or earns a low income. In that case a parent could receive an order as low as \$100 per month. When the intervention began, DCSS had recently issued statewide guidelines about when and how to apply for this reduction, but staff members still had discretion about whether or not to request it. The goal for the BICS intervention was to have case workers apply for the reduction systematically, whenever it was appropriate, so that low-income parents would receive orders they could pay.

Individuals were randomly assigned into one of two groups (see Figure 4). The control group continued to receive the standard procedures implemented by DCSS, including a mailed letter and an office meeting if a person responded. The BICS intervention group received new outreach materials and the enhanced meeting if a person came into the office.



**Figure 4. Random Assignment Diagram**

## RESULTS

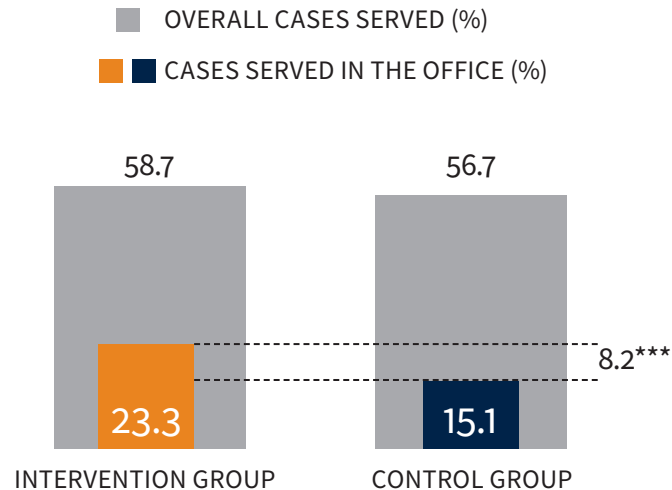
The study randomly assigned noncustodial parents with newly opened cases, in three Georgia child support offices, over an 11-month period from April 2016 to February 2017. The follow-up period was 6 months, from February to July 2017. There were 2,931 individuals in the sample, with 1,463 in the intervention group and 1,468 in the control group.

Figure 5 shows the main outcomes for individuals in the intervention and control groups. The BICS intervention achieved its primary goal. The new outreach materials produced an 8.2 percentage point increase in the rate at which people were served in the office voluntarily, from 15.1 percent of the control group to 23.3 percent of the intervention group. This difference is statistically significant and represents a 54 percent increase. The new outreach materials did not affect the overall rate of cases served, which was close to 60 percent in both groups. These results suggest that the intervention reached parents who would otherwise still have been served, but led more of them to visit the office rather than waiting for the more costly and adversarial method of receiving service.

There were no impacts on longer-term outcome measures such as the number of fathers whose paternity was established, the number of parents for whom child support orders were established, the amount of time it took to establish orders,



**Figure 5. Overall Cases Served and Cases Served in the Office**



SOURCE: MDRC calculations based on data from the Georgia Division of Child Support Services.

NOTES: Results in this figure are regression-adjusted, controlling for pre-random assignment characteristics.

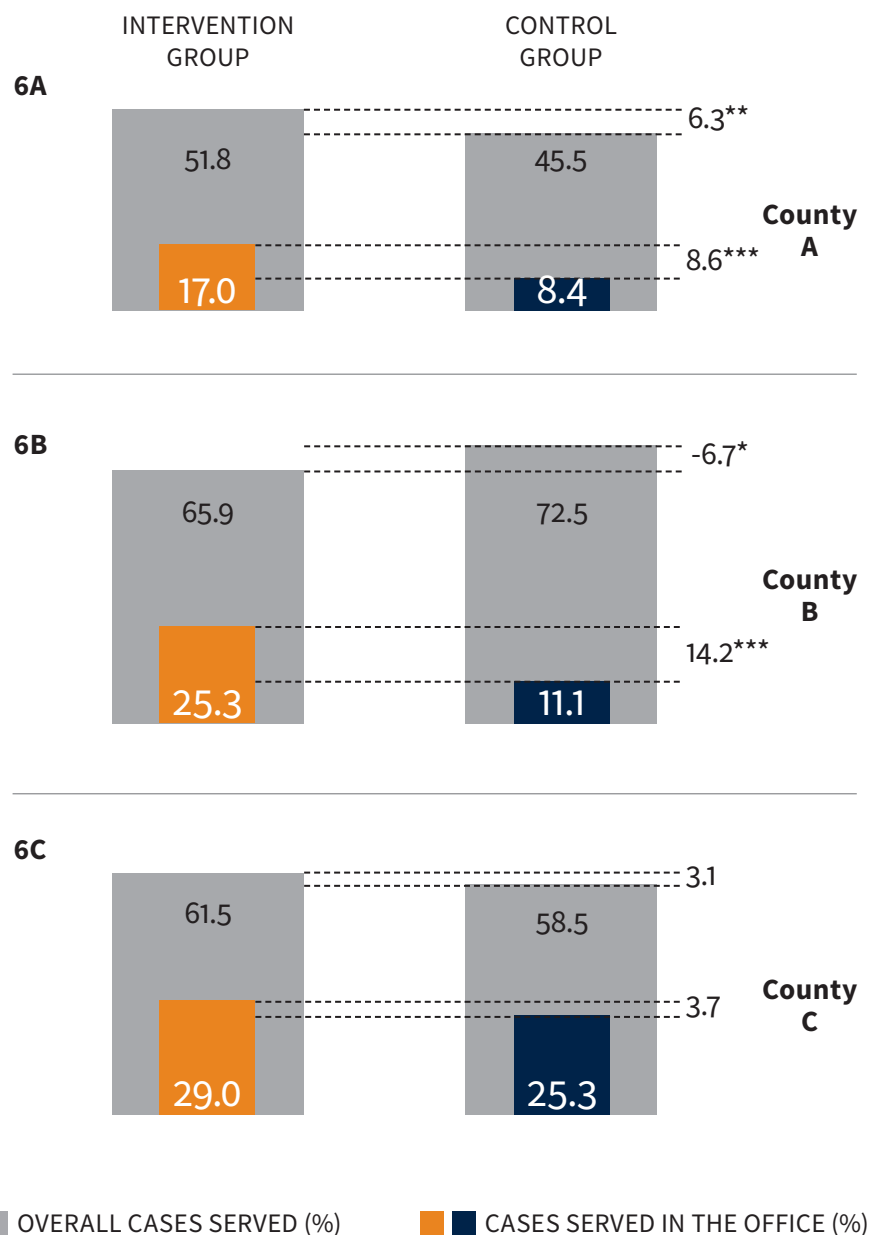
Statistical significance levels are indicated as: \*\*\* = 1 percent; \*\* = 5 percent; \* = 10 percent.

the amounts parents were ordered to pay, or parents' payment behavior after six months. It may be that the impact of 8.2 percentage points on accepting service voluntarily is not large enough to result in detectable longer-term outcomes for the entire intervention group. It may be that this intervention does not have an effect on longer-term outcomes. Or it may be that it takes longer than six months for impacts to become evident.

The effect of the intervention varied among the three offices (Figure 6). The largest office, in an urban setting, had an 8.6 percentage point impact on the number of parents who were served in the office, and a 6.3 percentage point impact on overall cases served (Figure 6A). The intervention was the most successful there. The smallest office in the study, in a rural setting, had a 14.2 percentage point impact on service in the office, but a negative impact on overall cases served (Figure 6B). It is unclear why the intervention would have decreased overall service rates there. There was no effect on either outcome in the third office, which was urban and mid-sized (Figure 6C). There are two hypotheses that may explain this office's results. First, this office saw more parents coming in for service voluntarily than the other two when the study began, perhaps because unlike the other two offices, its existing notice included an appointment date and time. The inclusion of an appointment date and time may be causing the impacts in the other offices. On the

other hand, this office had the most implementation challenges. One big challenge was that the office flooded during the study, and during that time noncustodial parents could not accept service voluntarily even though letters continued to be mailed.

**Figure 6. Overall Cases Served and Cases Served in the Office, by County**



SOURCE: MDRC calculations based on data from the Georgia Division of Child Support Services.

NOTES: Results in this figure are regression-adjusted, controlling for pre-random assignment characteristics.

Statistical significance levels are indicated as: \*\*\* = 1 percent; \*\* = 5 percent; \* = 10 percent.

The differences in impacts on overall cases served and on cases served in the office are statistically significant at the 5 percent level.

## IMPLEMENTATION

The intervention was largely implemented as designed, with fidelity to randomization and study procedures. When creating and mailing the outreach materials, staff members generally followed protocol, including handwriting elements of the letter and envelope and sending the reminder notices on schedule. When holding the enhanced meetings, case workers serving the intervention group did not seem to make more requests to apply for the order reduction for parents with low incomes than case workers who served the control group, and the intervention and control groups had similar average order amounts. It is not clear whether staff members did not apply for more reductions because the opportunity did not arise, or whether they were still reluctant to exercise their discretion in this way.

Front-line staff members reported that many parents reacted positively to the study materials, finding them novel, clear, and likable. In interviews with parents, all responded favorably to the magnet, smiling when it was mentioned. Parents reported putting it on their refrigerators. They also expressed positive reactions to the enhanced meeting, if they attended, providing support for the idea that going to the office gives parents the opportunity to discuss their obligations and start their relationships with the child support office on better footing. Parents in the intervention group felt that they were treated fairly and respectfully by case workers. They complimented the BICS-trained staff members for answering their questions, walking them through the process, and identifying the next steps they should take. One parent said that the BICS-trained staff member explained the process and next steps, doing so both quickly and professionally, and “talked to me like I was a human being.”

Most administrators and staff members found the new meeting procedure to be an improvement. They described the training and approach as “eye-opening,” “non-intimidating,” “making parents more comfortable,” and “building a relationship.” Turnover meant that some staff members did not receive all of the comprehensive procedural justice training provided, but those who came on board later still received an abridged version.

The cost of materials for the new outreach strategy is \$3.75 per program group participant. The most significant cost was the reminder magnets, which cost \$1.14 each (or several hundred dollars per office), though not all of the magnets were used because the number of appointments fluctuated from month to month.

## LESSONS AND NEXT STEPS

This intervention aimed to increase noncustodial parents’ voluntary participation in the child support order establishment process. The intervention achieved this goal. While the intervention contained many elements, making it difficult to point to the

most important factor causing the results, it is likely that the results can largely be attributed to (1) creating a clear deadline for action by setting an appointment and (2) orienting the rest of the mailed materials to help a parent prepare for and attend that appointment. This conclusion is supported by the overall service rates and the variation in impacts among the offices. Child support programs should consider providing parents with specific appointments and clearly communicated deadlines for action to help customers complete important tasks, even if there are no mandates to meet those deadlines. Although the meetings with case workers in the BICS intervention group did not influence the amounts of parents' child support orders or their likelihood of paying, staff members and parents who attended the appointments and participated in interviews were satisfied with the experience. Increasing satisfaction in a system that has traditionally been prosecutorial in nature is an important, positive outcome.

The intervention did not affect the overall service rate, suggesting that some of the people who agreed to accept service in the office would have been served by more adversarial means. From a resource-management perspective, using strategies informed by behavioral science to reach customers who are the easiest to serve allows the system to devote more resources to those who are harder to locate and serve. Additional research in this area could test techniques that help staff members be more effective in these latter efforts, and could test additional tools to support noncustodial parents who come into the office.

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